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Book Review: Steven Shaviro, *The Rhythm Image: Music Videos and New Audiovisual Forms* (New York; London; Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023)

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Steven Shaviro, *The Rhythm Image: Music Videos and New Audiovisual Forms* (New York; London; Dublin: Bloomsbury Academic, 2023), pp. 216, ISBN: 9781501388552 (hb), £90.00; ISBN: 9781501388569 (pb), £21.99; ISBN: 9781501388576 (ebook ePub and Mobi), £19.79; ISBN: 9781501388583 (ebook PDF), £19.79.

By its nature, any cutting edge where developing technology, creative expression and overarching theory intersect will be a moving target. Identifying and describing where that kind of cutting edge lies is a delicate business. Steven Shaviro's *The Rhythm Image* locates one of its facets in a paradigm emerging from the hybrid, experimental form of the music video. Freed from any obligation to narrative, accommodating technical innovation more easily than the feature film, and enjoying a wider circulation than more typically avant-garde creations, these short works prove a fertile ground for the kind of experimentation identified and celebrated by Shaviro here, building on themes sketched in his earlier work, particularly *Digital Music Videos* (2017).
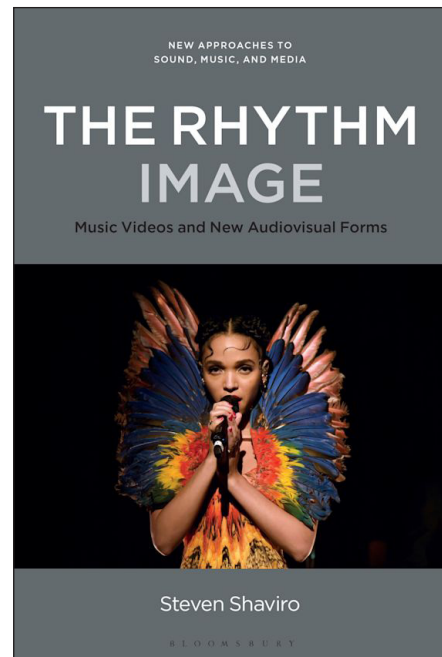
The 'rhythm image' adds to the growing list of proposed successors—Shaviro acknowledges alternatives but deliberately does not engage directly with them (14)—to Gilles Deleuze's (1983; 1985) historical 'movement image' and 'time image'. The precise nature of Shaviro's proposed new schema lies in a McLuhan-esque alteration of ratios between the senses and patterns of perception, brought about by digital media and the social transformations heralded by exponential increases in computational capacities. Instead of subordinating time to movement, or presenting time in its supposedly pure state as duration, the rhythm image reveals time through its fluctuating effects, as a non-linear assemblage of pulsations, syncopations and superpositions, compressed and contorted into new shapes and relationships by its digital quantification. Music videos, as Shaviro demonstrates, are particularly rich in such effects.

An opening chapter sets out the context and parameters of this theory with such admirable clarity and concision that even those only glancingly familiar with Deleuze and his descendants might comfortably follow the thread. Efficient gestures are also made to prior scholarship on music videos and to the current discourse on the digital audiovisual regime and its position within a neo-liberal capitalist, post-disciplinary 'control society' (16). This is certainly a lot of weight for an opening chapter to bear, and indeed, it is only in the introduction's closing pages that a brief analysis of the video for Lorde's 'Green Light' (2017) begins to demonstrate the nature of the rhythm image. Once the stage is set, it is with evident relish that Shaviro launches into this and subsequent close readings. The solid foundations provided by the opening chapter

allow subsequent analyses to remain remarkably direct, seldom straying from the videos themselves into thickets of theory.

In short succession, Massive Attack's 'Splitting the Atom' (2009) opens up the radical spaces made possible by three-dimensional modelling; Dawn Richards' 'Calypso' (2015) posits a utopian cyborg-subjecthood through data-sampling and feedback loops; while the fifteen minute-long segments of Tierra Whack's 'Whack World' (2015) together posit the possibility of self-celebration even as the periodicity and discrete moments of a digital world deny the continuity of experience. In a pair of chapters where the videographic material complicates the music, time and space are respectively sampled and compressed into fragmentation in Bonobo's 'Kerala' (2016) and 'No Reason' (2017), before the rhythms of FKA twigs' 'cellophane' (2019) and 'sad day' (2020) are productively enriched and expanded by their relationship to their videos. Moses Sumney's 'Worth It' (2016), 'Virile' (2019) and 'Me in 20 years' (2020) performatively problematise gender identity and interpersonal relationships within an environment of disjunction and nonreciprocity, before the constant renegotiation of digital temporality is once more interrogated in the hedonistic almost-narrative of The Weeknd's 'Heartless' (2019), 'Blinding Lights' (2020), the 'After Hours' short film (2020) and 'In Your Eyes' (2020), taken together as a sequence. The emotive asynchronicity in evidence in the ebb and flow of Tkay Maidza's Pixies cover 'Where is My Mind?' (2021) permits a recapitulation of the theoretical context of the rhythm image, before an Afterword finally uses the two visualisations of Charli XCX's 'Beg For You' (both 2022) to tie together all the preceding case studies in a summary of the rhythm image's emergent themes.

Ranging from the 'Greatest Song of All Time,' according to Billboard, to less well-known or experimental material, the selection shifts between several genres but includes no startling stylistic outliers that might extend the range of the rhythm image. Shaviro evokes the musical dimension of the videos in his customarily rich, phenomenologically informed balance of technical and affective language, without shying away from articulating personal responses and impressions. Nevertheless, since Shaviro takes many of his forebears who have theorised the moving image to task for paying scant attention to the role of sound in the audiovisual ensemble, one might expect a more detailed consideration than can be found here of how digitally manipulated sound (sampling, looping, AutoTune etc.) factors into the rhythm image, especially since music has largely run ahead of image-making in reckoning with the possibilities of digital manipulation, and features heavily in most of the tracks included here.

The overall impression is one of depth dressed by deft hands to make a provocative and at times affecting argument for the emergence of the rhythm image and its unprecedented qualities. Some doubts remain, however. Newness is sometimes

proclaimed and taken for granted, where it might instead be demonstrated through distinction against what seem clear precedents. Explicit reference to cinematic inspirations is mostly limited to the chapter on The Weeknd, so a puzzling moment compares shots of Moses Sumney shadow-boxing amid hanging carcasses in an abattoir in 'Virile' not to Rocky Balboa, but to Muhammad Ali. Elsewhere, Shaviro declares that he has never seen a shift in aspect ratio like that in Sumney's 'Me in 20 Years' (142), though Xavier Dolan's *Tom at the Farm* (2013) offers at least one clear precedent just a few years earlier. Shaviro declares at one point that 'nobody could even have *imagined* certain looks and appearances' (79) that are discussed here any earlier – a statement that reflects the ambition on display, but also perhaps a limited frame of reference. In short, if we never look back, everything looks new.

Only posterity can tell if this particular cutting edge will retain its sharpness, if its terms will be adopted into a wider academic discourse beyond Shaviro's own work here. Overall, however, *The Rhythm Image* can be recommended as a provocative, engaging and relevant work, accessible enough for graduate discussion. It will be of interest to anyone fascinated by how our digital lives are being transmuted into today's media forms, through which Shaviro promises the blissful possibility of an enrapturing, audiovisual liberation.

Competing Interests

The author has no competing interests to declare.